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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7670
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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 7723
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 5904
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 4253
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1830
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 4258
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3354
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 8332
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5823
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0535
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION PRIORITY
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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS (BILLINGSLEY) AND DRL/NESCA (MIKOSZ)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [SCUL](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: SURGE IN VIOLENCE AND INTIMIDATION
AGAINST FREE MEDIA

REF: 07 COLOMBO 1489 (AND PREVIOUS)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Intimidation and attacks on the media in Sri Lanka have risen sharply since the beginning of the year. The International Federation of Journalists ranked Sri Lanka as the fifth deadliest country for journalists based on 2007 incidents that included six recorded deaths. January portends even worse for 2008: press organizations report that in January at least three journalists were attacked with knives, journalists' cars have been rammed and attempts made to run them off the road, and at least six journalists received death threats. The Free Media Movement reported that police tried to abduct the General Secretary of the Sri Lankan Journalists' Association. Statements by senior Sri Lankan officials encourage the trend toward censorship and intimidation: Army Commander Sarath Fonseka labeled sections of the media and journalists "traitors" in an interview published on January 2. In a January 27 interview with a Sinhalese nationalist daily, Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa reportedly stated, "journalists should not be allowed to write about military matters." The International Federation of Journalists and other international organizations have issued strong statements on the situation. The Ambassador expressed concern about Sri Lanka's worsening environment for press freedom in a February 1 meeting with the Foreign Secretary. End Summary.

THREATS AND ATTACKS AGAINST MEDIA MULTIPLY IN JANUARY

¶2. (SBU) The media freedom environment in Sri Lanka continues to deteriorate, with press organizations reporting dozens of attacks and threats against journalists in January. Journalists and other observers claim that the attacks are organized, sanctioned, and in some cases carried out by members of the government and the police. In other cases, they say, the police have not responded to complaints journalists have filed with them, citing one recent case of police refusing to act even when the victim knew the identity of the attackers.

13. (SBU) Public statements by senior leaders are stoking the fires: Army Commander Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka accused sections of the media of "treachery" in a January 2 interview. Defense Secretary (and brother of the president) Gotabhaya Rajapaksa called for media censorship, the judicial enforcement of criminal defamation and the prosecution of two specific media outlets for "critical reportage" in a January 27 interview. "Journalists should not be allowed to write about military matters. Strong action ought to be taken against those who do. We should return to the laws that criminalize defamation in order to punish those who try to murder us," he was quoted. Government websites also complain about "sordid media operations." The Media Center for National Security warned on Jan. 19 that "rumors, including SMS text messaging, regarding the war situation will be dealt with severely." Social Welfare Minister Douglas Devananda (also head of the pro-government EPDP armed paramilitary) accused Tamil television personality Sri Ranga Jeyaratnam of working on behest of the LTTE and publicly called on police to investigate this "traitor."

STATE TV EMPLOYEES TURN TABLES ON POLITICAL THUG

14. (SBU) A number of the January offenses appear to be related to the December 27 raid by Deputy Labor Minister Mervyn Silva into the offices of the state-controlled television station Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC). Silva was reportedly upset because the station opted not to air an obscene, defamatory speech he had given. In that incident, Silva ordered the men with him to beat up the Channel's news director, who has since been transferred from

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his post. Outraged employees of the state-run television then surrounded Silva and his henchmen, cornering them for hours until elite police until were able to free them. In the aftermath, SLRC journalist Lal Hemantha Mawalage, was run down and severely stabbed on January 25. He told police he received death threats subsequent to the December 27 incident, and his car had been rammed three days prior to the knife attack. Three other senior media personnel of the MTV Channel, which covered the incident extensively, have also reported death threats in connection with Silva's attempted storming of the television station. Rather than looking into Silva's invasion of the station, the Criminal Investigation Division has called in at least 21 SLRC journalists for questioning on the incident.

"TRAITOR" LABEL USED TO STIFLE REPORTS ON CORRUPTION

15. (SBU) In spite of some government officials' claims that the media are taking the side of the LTTE, many of the journalists who have suffered attacks have been covering corruption and transparency issues, reporting on such seemingly non-political topics as illegal sand mining. The Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association and other groups have claimed that criminal gangs associated with Minister de Silva are responsible for several of the attacks. Our media contacts have explained that often journalists will be accused of being unpatriotic and threatened with suits alleging they are revealing state secrets or aiding the enemy in order to "encourage" them not to cover individual cases of corruption.

TAMIL MEDIA IN JAFFNA UNDER ATTACK

16. (SBU) Journalists at Tamil language publications are at particular risk. Suahib Kassim, the former Associate Editor of a state-controlled Tamil daily was stabbed on January 28 at his home. He had previously received death threats, and had been transferred from his position a few days before the attack. The staff of the Tamil newspaper Uthayan in Jaffna have reported new threats. As previously reported, Uthayan

has probably suffered the most of any Sri Lankan media organization. Two support staff were killed when the Uthayan office was attacked in May 2006. A delivery man for the newspaper was killed in August 2006 while in a Uthayan vehicle. Uthayan journalist Selvaraha Rajivaram was one of the six journalists killed in 2007. No one has been arrested for these attacks. The editor of Uthayan has reportedly not left the newspaper's office for more than a year for fear of being killed.

GOVERNMENT SHUTS DOWN CELLPHONE MESSAGING SERVICE

17. (SBU) Media contacts also lamented the government's order to cellphone providers to block text-messaging services for six hours on Sri Lanka's February 4 Independence Day. The government also shut down all cellphone service, voice and text, in the North and East. The government claimed that the measure was for security purposes, but telecommunications experts pointed out that Sri Lanka's Telecommunications Act lays out procedures for such actions. Among other process-related omissions, the government failed to inform the fee-paying public about the nature of the threat and how shutting off service was necessary to counter it.

18. (U) The International Federation of Journalists, the Overseas Press Club of America, Reporters Without Frontiers, Amnesty International, and other international associations have written to the President and issued statements condemning the spiral of press intimidation and the public vilification of journalists in Sri Lanka.

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19. (SBU) COMMENT: Ambassador raised U.S. concerns about the situation in a February 1 meeting with Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona, and will continue to do so with senior GSL interlocutors. Threats and violence against journalists are not new in Sri Lanka, but the spate of incidents in January represents a disturbing increase in violent and potentially fatal attacks against the media. Inflammatory comments by senior political leaders tend to encourage the thugs who would harm journalists, indirectly provoking further violence. In the wake of a number of bomb attacks in government-controlled areas of Sri Lanka in the lead-up to the February 4 Independence Day observances, it is likely that this government will continue to pressure the press. We will continue to deliver the message that Sri Lanka must respect media freedom, and that the recent actions and statements against journalists have done serious harm to the country's image abroad.

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